DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 289 096 CG 020 362

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TITLE Counselor Adequacy in Special Education.
PUB DATE 85
NOTE 10p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Counselor Attitudes; *Counselor Qualifications; Counselor Role; *Counselor Training; *Disabilities; Exceptional Persons; High Schools; Public Schools; *School Counselors; *Special Education; Student Characteristics; Student Needs

ABSTRACT

The law has mandated the inclusion of handicapped children in all appropriate programs of public education, including school counseling programs. A lack of preparation in the area of special education on the part of the school counselor could decrease the effectiveness of school counseling for handicapped students. A study was conducted to survey the amount of contact counselors had with exceptional students, the relationship between self-perceived counselor effectiveness and special education background, and the willingness of counselors to seek additional training in special education in order to feel more effective. Questionnaires addressing these issues were completed by 91 high school counselors. The results revealed that the majority of respondents were not working with significant numbers of special education students. Counselors who reported feeling adequately prepared to work with these students were as likely to have taken one or more special education courses as were those who did not feel adequately prepared. Almost one-half of the respondents indicated they would not be interested in taking special education coursework to increase their effectiveness in working with exceptional students. (NB)

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COUNSELOR ADEQUACY IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

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COUNSELOR ADEQUACY IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

Abstract

A survey of secondary school counselors found a majority spend little time, feel adequate, and do not wish additional training in working with exceptional children.

Counselor Adequacy in Special Education

Recent public law (e.g. 94-142) has mandated the inclusion of handicapped children in all appropriate programs of public education. School counseling is one such program. However, a lack of preparation in the area of special education on the part of school counselors raises the question of the effectiveness of this program for the handicapped population.

There is relatively little data concerning the counseling needs of special education students and even less dealing with educating the counselor of special education students. Lombana (1980a) is of the opinion that one of the most productive and rewarding tasks a school counselor can engage in is creating a climate in which exceptional and "normal" children can appreciate, understand and enjoy each other. In order to do this, the counselor must gain a basic knowledge of the attitudes and what can be done to change them. Research by Evans (1976) reveals that stress experienced by "normal" people is due to the fact that they do not know how to interact with exceptional people. Thus, contact is avoided. According to Hunt (1960) the training of counselors is frequently inadequate to allow for acceptance or understanding of the exceptional child. In 1969, Patterson stated school counselors knew little about disabilities and the problems involved. Further, he maintained most school counselors simply had nothing in their education to prepare them to work with disabled students.

Humes (1978) offers the opinion that counselor educators and supervisors will have to initiate preservice and in-service programs to help counselors take the key roles in the implementation of P.L. 94-142 that they are expected to take.

Gallagher (1970) notes that studies of exceptional children have excluded such important information as the extent of the counselor's preparation and experience. A study of the school counselor's role in special education (Lebsock and DeBlassie, 1975) found nearly one half of the counselors surveyed felt inadequate in dealing with exceptional children.

Sixty percent of the counselors indicated they would be more willing to serve special education students if their training in special education had been more extensive.

Lombana (1980b) found that counselors are spending a disproportionate amount of time with exceptional students, considering the comparatively small percentage of such students typically enrolled in public schools. These counselors, however, do not feel adequate in dealing with exceptionalities.

The literature reviewed indicates a need for counselors to have at least a basic understanding of special education students prior to actually working with them. It was the goal of this study to survey the amount of counselor contact with exceptional students, the relationship between self-perceived counselor effectiveness and special education background, and the willingness of counselors to seek additional training in special education in order to feel more effective.

Method

A questionnaire was mailed to a random sample of 100 high school counselors in Kansas, and 91 forms were returned for a 91% response rate. The survey, a copy of which may be obtained upon request, basically asked respondents for the amount of training and experience they have in counseling exceptional children. The survey further requested the counselors' interest in additional training in the development of skills for working with this population.

Results

The counselors in this sample were a relatively experienced group with more than 50% having over 10 years of experience. The first question of interest was the amount of counselor contact with exceptional students. From Table 1 it can be seen that 66% reported less than 10% of their time is spent with this group. Only one respondent spent more than 50% of the time, and no respondents indicated they spent as much as 75% of their time

with these students. Evidently the majority of counselors are not working with significant numbers of special education students.

Insert Table 1 about here

The second question concerned the relationship between self-perceived effectiveness with this population and special education background. Seven counselors did not respond to this question. Of those who did, 67% felt adequate to deal with special education clients. There was no significant relationship between this feeling of adequacy and number of years of counseling experience (chi square = 2.92, df = 4, prob. = .57), amount of time spent with these students (chi square = 3.1, df = 3, prob. = .37), or number of special education classes taken (chi square = 1.3, df = 2, prob. = .53). Thus, those counselors who felt adequate were as likely to have taken one or more special education classes as those who did not feel adequate.

The final question concerned the willingness of counselors to seek additional training, particularly if they felt inadequate. The questionnaire asked: "If they were readily available to you would you enroll in special education courses to increase your effectiveness with exceptional students?" Of those who responded to this question (eight did not), 54% indicated they would. Thus almost half of these counselors indicated they would not be interested in such coursework. There was no relationship between the time spent with special education students and willingness to enroll in additional coursework (chi square = 3.7, df = 1, prob. = .54). There was, however, a relationship between felt adequacy and willingness to enroll. Those who felt adequate were less likely to enroll and those who felt inadequate were more likely to enroll (chi square = 6.69, df = 1, prob. = .01). When asked if they would feel more adequate if they had more extensive training in special education, those who felt adequate already were less likely to agree than those who did not feel adequate (chi square = 5.1, df = 1, prob. = .02). Since there was no difference

between these groups in special education background, this finding suggests that those who feel adequate do not tend to attribute this to special education coursework.

Discussion

These results suggest that counselors are not typically spending an inordinate amount of time with special education students and that, in general, they feel adequate to work with this population. This is somewhat contrary to the survey results of Lombana (1980b) and Lebsock and DeBlassie (1975), who had found somewhat more contact and less perceived adequacy.

The most interesting results from this survey consisted in relationship between special education training and work with exceptional students. Having taken special education classes was found to be unrelated to self-perceived adequacy, and 46% of the respondents indicated a lack of interest in taking such courses to increase their effectiveness. Although those counselors who felt less adequate in working with these students did indicate an interest in additional coursework, since there was no significant difference in special education background between those counselors feeling adequate and those feeling inadequate, one wonders about the effect of such courses on self-perceived adequacy.

Lebsock and DeBlassie (1975) found that only 13% of the counselor education programs they surveyed required special education courses as a part of their program. This may be more a reflection of the perception of counselor educators concerning the efficacy of these courses in regard to counselor effectiveness with handicapped children, than one of the need for counselors to know how to work with this population.

If counselor training is generic, then the skills acquired should be applicable to all groups. Then the counselor's effectiveness with any one group would depend much more on the attitude held toward the group than on a lack of skill. Although Hunt (1960) felt that counselor training was usually inadequate in facilitating the acceptance of exceptional children, this issue is certainly worth more research and study.

It is only common sense to educate oneself about any group with which one is working, and presumably counselors who have dealings with exceptional children are doing this, although this is also worth some study. The project of the Midwest Regional Resource Center at Drake University on counseling special students is a good example of a resource that counselors might draw upon to augment their understanding of this population. According to McDavis, Nutter, & Lovett (1982), handicapped children and their parents want counselor involvement and support, and these authors suggest counselors need to spend more of their time serving these needs. The issue of adequacy will not go away and continuing study of these issues is called for.

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Table 1

Time Spent with Exceptional Students

Percent of Time	0-10	11-25	26-50	51-75	76-100
Percent Responding	68	28	2	1	0
Number Responding	60	25	2	1	0